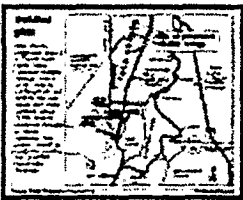

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Delta islands at center of refuge plan

55,000-acre swath would become habitat

By Jim Nickles
Record Staff Writer

Amid growing debate over converting large portions of the Delta into habitat for endangered species, three federal agencies are studying a 55,000-acre swath of land between Rio Vista and Sacramento for creation of a new national wildlife refuge.



With little fanfare or public notice, the agencies have purchased or are negotiating to buy three Delta islands covering about 7,800 acres in Solano and Yolo counties.

The islands -- Little Holland Tract, Liberty Island and Prospect Island -- would form the core of the proposed North Delta National Wildlife Refuge.

The refuge's restored wetlands, grasslands and waterside forests would provide habitat for the Delta smelt, the giant garter snake, the Swainson's hawk and other protected species, a spokesman for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said.

But the agency and its two partners, the Army Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Reclamation, are studying a much larger, 55,000-acre area across southern Yolo and Solano counties.

Eventually, the refuge could cover most of the southern part of the Yolo Bypass, which carries Sacramento River floodwaters into the Delta, said Fish and Wildlife biologist John Castellano, who is helping plan the preserve.

Levees on the three islands would be breached, creating wetlands and other habitat for fish, waterfowl, native plants and other troubled species. Tearing down the levees would also ease the flow of floodwaters through the bypass and into the north Delta, he said.

The federal agencies are negotiating only with willing sellers, Castellano said. And, at least initially, only flood-prone islands within the bypass -- with no residents or permanent buildings -- will be acquired.

The Corps of Engineers has been negotiating to buy Little Holland Tract, while the Bureau of Reclamation has purchased Prospect Island. Meanwhile, the Fish and Wildlife Service is trying to buy Liberty Island.

All three islands are being farmed and produce a variety of crops, such as tomatoes, beans, safflower and black-eyed peas.

The total cost of the refuge has not been determined, Castellano said.

But some of the planning, land purchases and preparation of an environmental-impact statement are being funded by an \$8 million grant from the CALFED Bay-Delta Program.

CALFED, a coalition of state and federal agencies formed in 1994 to end the state's water wars, is considering sweeping measures to restore the Delta ecosystem while improving the flow of water through the estuary's maze of waterways to the state and federal export pumps near Tracy. One option under consideration is an around-the-Delta bypass from the Sacramento River to the pumps.

Next week, CALFED officials will conduct their second public-information session in the Stockton area.

At a packed meeting in May, San Joaquin County officials, farmers and water agencies blasted CALFED's plans to convert a large part of the Delta into habitat.

But aside from one public meeting in Davis in March and another scheduled for Tuesday in Vacaville, federal agencies have released little information about the proposed new wildlife sanctuary,

"I hadn't heard of that," said San Joaquin County Board of Supervisors Chairman George Barber, who owns a farm near Thornton in the north Delta.

"I have no clue what that is," Supervisor Dario Marengo said. "I don't know who's doing it, why. ... Hopefully we'll get some information on it."

Castellano said more meetings could be scheduled before plans for the refuge are completed late this year.

Rep. Richard Pombo, R-Tracy, who said he had received some information on the proposed refuge from federal officials, said CALFED alone could take more than 300,000 acres of Delta farmland out of production.

And when you include the proposed North Delta refuge, the 5-year-old Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge and the Cosumnes River Preserve -- both in southern Sacramento County -- as much as 450,000 acres of farmland across the Delta eventually could be devoted to wildlife, he said.

"What they are talking about taking out of production is more irrigated agriculture than we have in this entire county," he said. "When you look at the impact on our economy and us in that region, you're talking about a major impact."

The Delta Protection Commission is just starting to review the planned refuge, Executive Director Margit Aramburu said. The commission has not taken a position yet, but commissioners have serious reservations about CALFED's habitat conversion plans and whether they will benefit wildlife.

"Once you flood an agricultural island, you're not going to get it back," she said. "To me, it's an irretrievable commitment of an irreplaceable natural resource. So I just think we ought to be really sure (flooding) is needed and that it's being done in a way that benefits the species we're trying to restore."

CALFED meeting

The CALFED Bay-Delta Program will conduct a public meeting starting at 5:30 p.m. Monday at the Roberts Union Farm Center, on Howard Road on Roberts Island, just south of Stockton. Information: (916) 657-2666.

Wildlife refuge

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will have an open house on the proposed North Delta National Wildlife Refuge at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday at the Ulatis Community Center, 1000 Ulatis Drive, Vacaville. Information: